



H. 53 – House Proposal of Amendment to Senate Proposal of Amendment

The Vermont Network strongly supports Committee bill H. 53, which would allocate a portion of revenues from marriage license fees to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund, which is currently experiencing a projected \$350,000 deficit due to declining revenues.

Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund

The Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund was established in 2008, is set forth in 13 V.S.A. § 5360 and is administered by the Vermont Center for Crime Victim Services. The fund serves as a primary revenue source for critically important services for victims, as well as systems which improve public responses to domestic and sexual violence.

The revenues for the Fund are currently comprised of a portion of two revenue sources, a surcharge on criminal and civil judgements (including traffic tickets) and a portion of the marriage fee.

- Currently there is a **\$47.00 surcharge on criminal and civil judgements** (including traffic violations). Of this surcharge:
 - \$10.00 goes to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund
 - \$29.75 goes to the Victims Compensation Fund
 - \$7.25 goes to the General Fund

- Currently there is a **\$60 marriage license fee**. Of the marriage license fee:
 - \$35 goes to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund
 - \$10 is retained by the town of issuance
 - \$15 goes to the General Fund

Due to declining revenues, primarily related to criminal justice reform efforts and changing law enforcement practices related to traffic enforcement, the fund has seen significant declines in recent years. In the current year, the fund is anticipated to have a \$350,000 shortfall.

The Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund provides approximately \$900,000 annually to support the provision of statewide and local victim services. The revenues from the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund are used to support our responses to domestic violence in Vermont including:

- Almost half of the fund is passed through directly to local domestic and sexual violence organizations using a funding formula that accounts for variables such as population, geographic area served and services provided.
- Approximately \$90,000/year is distributed to Member Organizations as direct support for survivors and is used for immediate expenses such as housing, transportation or other basic needs services.
- Funding for Deaf Vermonters Advocacy Services which provides services to victims of crime in Vermont who are Deaf, Deaf-Blind or Hard of Hearing.
- Funding for SafeSpace at the Pride Center of Vermont which is a statewide anti-violence program which provides advocacy services to victims of crime who are LGBTQ.
- Funding to support staffing for the Vermont Council on Domestic Violence.



In 2022, the Joint Fiscal Office issued a report on the status of crime victim special funds and made recommendations for potential policy solutions¹. Those policy options include dedicating to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund *the entirety of the \$15 general fund share of the marriage license fees*. This option is set forth in the language you are considering today. H. 53 is a germane and appropriate vehicle, given the relationship of civil traffic-related violations and the performance of the Special Fund.

The House proposal of amendment to the Senate proposal of amendment that you have in front of you today would make the following change to Vermont's marriage license fee:

- **Increase the marriage license fee from \$60 to \$80.** Of the proposed increase, the language would dedicate:
 - \$50 to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund – reflecting the \$15 increase recommended by JFO;
 - \$15 to be retained by the town of issuance, an increase of \$5 for Town Clerks and;
 - \$15 to the General Fund, which will not result in any loss to the General Fund.

While in the House, Ways and Means discussed a more significant increase to the Domestic and Sexual Violence Special Fund, using an increase in divorce fees. After much discussion, and significant concern from the Court Administrator's Office about raising one court filing fee over and above others, the House Ways and Means Committee passed the language you have in front of you today. This will result in a \$70,000 increase to the Fund's revenues. This change, in combination with moving some other expenses out of the fund, will help provide more stable and sustainable revenues for critical services in our communities.

This is a small but critically important change that will make a significant difference for victims of domestic and sexual violence in Vermont and we would appreciate your support.

¹ [2022 Joint Fiscal Office Report](#)